

ROUTLEDGE STUDIES IN NEW MEDIA AND  
CYBERCULTURE

# Mobile Technology and Place

Edited by  
Rowan Wilken and Gerard Goggin





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## 6 The Real Estate of the Trained-Up Self (Or is this England?)

Caroline Bassett

[S]harpen your mind wherever you are . . . Speed Brain is a healthy addition to your iPhone! (Lumosity.com website)

Whose streets? Our streets! (adopted by UK students demonstrating against university fee increases)<sup>1</sup>

In a land where neoliberalism is actively terminating a certain kind of shared knowledge project (notably, the arts and humanities), where facts and skills are increasingly viewed as personal capital to be taken to market and "knowledge" is viewed as an object to be purchased, brain-training games (e.g., those found on Lumosity.com<sup>2</sup>) that are sold as painless, anytime, anywhere, personal aerobics for the brain—as mobile cognitive gymnasiums—seem a disturbingly tight fit. These games promise cognitive augmentation, rising efficiency, better concentration, and thence gains in personal productivity. Regular play using a suite of games accessible from a series of platforms promises to make you smarter. Your "Brain Processing Index" will rise and you will perform better, both absolutely and in relation to other players, and not only in the world of the game but also in the game of life—to deploy an increasingly empty but nonetheless loaded phrase, these games develop eminently "transferable skills."

Lumosity.com's promises are typical of contemporary brain-training products. The packages on offer bundle rigor (science, structure, the program), with ease (rapid improvement through exercises that take only a few minutes a day) and flexibility (ad hoc, anytime, anywhere use). Many earlier and more puritan forms of training shared the same instrumental goal of self-improvement; however, the methods were often rather different. Charles Dickens' utilitarian schoolteacher Mr. Gradgrind, for instance, famously dealt in content (the acquisition of "facts"),<sup>3</sup> whereas these games eschew content and instead claim to sharpen the senses and train cognitive facilities such as memory, mental dexterity, concentration, and attention. Moreover, in contrast to Gradgrind's absolute division between work and play (and their fixed locations in the classroom and the circus, respectively), in the case of

Lumosity.com, these are entwined: These games are sold as serious forms of fun (promising real-world results) and as fun forms of being serious (results come through enjoyable play). Designated as an all-ages mode of edutainment, they are not designed for timetabled play in the classroom, but for use in everyday spaces and places, including those that are conventionally designated public. What I am interested in teasing out here are the questions about place (and the relationship between various dimensions of contemporary place) that are raised by playing these self-improvement games in public.

Brain-training games line up with a contemporary preoccupation with self-improvement, an aspect of the more general project of self (variously explored by Giddens and differently by Foucault) that is said to be a central trope of modernity that is at once intensely personal but also social—a dialectic that can be expressed in spatial terms: gamers are subjects in space, and gaming is a practice in space that contributes to the making of place and to the making of relations of place.

Today's everyday urban places are complex, over-layered, "multiplex"<sup>4</sup> ecologies, combining fully proximate elements (human and non-human) with less substantial inputs from the more remote sites (communicational traffic of various kinds) and incorporating through that layering various temporalities. The micro activity of gaming—multiplied many times over, and each time enacting and also endorsing the enactment of a particular practice of space—contributes, if in small ways, to the production of a space as a place with particular characteristics. It thus adds a new ingredient to the ecology, tilting the balance of the multilayered spatial and temporal dynamics of a specific place, for instance the degree to which it may operate in more or less connected, accessible, social ways. Micro-gaming thus contributes to a more general reformation of the moral economy pertaining in relation to public places—to a change in ideas about how such space should be "rightly" used.

It is useful to begin by questioning the common assumption that density of digital devices produces density of connection. This neglects the specificity of devices (even converged devices), a specificity that emerges as they are put to use (because it is in use that meaningful distinctions may be made—between what technical architectures enable and what socio-technical formations produce and between what games model and what they do and make as they are practiced). Exploring mobile phones, Vince Miller argues that the rise in phatic culture in contemporary web sociality is evidence of the valorization of connected presence, supported by pervasive networks and intimate devices.<sup>5</sup> He connects this "virtually compulsive" desire for connectivity to the broader social contexts of what Beck and Giddens have discussed in terms of individualization and the project of the self.<sup>6</sup> In contrast, I argue here that the form of gaming I am exploring, which given its emphasis on individualization as a social priority also reflects to this broader formation, does something different. That is, it complicates as much as confirms the desire for, and production of, connectivity—where



the latter is understood as entertaining a mode of local, place-based interaction that might be understood as convivial.

In tension with digital media's tendency to produce connection (and the latter is the dominant expectation of pervasive computing) are the various forms of distancing, disconnection, and separation it also provokes. And if intimate media in Miller's account produces a desire for personal connection, this may be at some distance from, may conflict with, what I am tempted to call "common" connection, particularly common connection *in-place*. The vision of the everyday environment of the pervasively networked city as an increasingly public place needs to be tempered. This is explored here not only as a tension between connection and disconnection, but as a question of place and its dimensions, and as a tension between the formal sequestration of the game and the ambiguous location of play.

#### SCALE AND THE IMPORTANCE OF BEING TRIVIAL?

Underpinning this article is a personal ethnography of small game use in public (see my earlier work).<sup>7</sup> The attempt was to record an experience of gaming and to ask how gaming placed me in relation to the tissues and skeins of permanent and ephemeral elements—people, habits, objects, architectures—that constituted a local environment. The scale of the attempt was small—appropriately so, because brain-training games themselves are short and fast. They are everyday bits and pieces, taking up small fragments of space and time, and they produce a glancing, if intense, engagement with under-elaborated screen environments. Their casual portability, short duration, and visual simplicity sets them in stark contrast to highly elaborated networked virtual environments offering sustained engagement in virtual universes for players—and sustained sites for various forms of academic study and dispute, notably around the rival claims of narrativity and the ludic.<sup>8</sup> Instead, these games, this kind of gaming, this kind of micro approach, might fall within the purview of what the French theorist Georges Perec called the "infra-ordinary" and defined as a scale, something indicating both a form of life, and a suitable method to investigate it.<sup>9</sup> The nascent discipline of game studies rather lacks a sense of the trivial—and sometimes distinctly wants to emphasize its scientific approach.<sup>10</sup> Games scholars variously seek to establish the value of games' aesthetic qualities,<sup>11</sup> make claims for significance based on a valorization of popular over high culture or scarcity over mainstreaming—"cultural marginality warrants . . . truth value"<sup>12</sup> or focus on the market potential the games industry. These arguments have their merits. However, given the two-pronged promotional appeal, to "science" and to the discourse of self-improvement, that the training games make, it seems useful to go with Perec and cleave to the essential triviality of these games—trying to find a way of approaching them that registers their lack of importance and also explores what they

might reveal *because* of their trivial scale—for instance, what they might suggest about intimate dispositions of bodily interaction that might not easily be got at any other way. Perec's approach to the exploration of the everyday was endotic. He sought to find ways to turn inward, to inquire closely into the minutiae of experience—often his own experience—and to do so in ways that were only barely methodological. As he put it:

It matters little to me that these questions should be fragmentary, barely indicative of a method, at most of a project. It matters a lot to me that they should seem trivial and futile: that's exactly what makes them just as essential, if not more so, as all the other questions by which we have tried in vain to lay hold on our truth.<sup>13</sup>

In the following sections, the questions I have asked about these games are opened up further, first, through a consideration of play as rehearsal and/or performance, and, second, in relation to artificial memory and the dimensions of interior place. Third, I consider brain games as self-renovation projects that promise to reduce personal lag. Finally, I ask what these training games might seek to teach us about public places and how to use them.

#### EVERYDAY LIFE: PRACTICE, REHEARSAL, PLAY

Brain-training games set you up in your own private cognitive gym, providing a collapsible/inflatable space made of the same digital material that has, over the years, enabled many forms of collaboration, from temporary autonomous zones<sup>14</sup> to crowd sourcing projects.<sup>15</sup> In this case, however, the zone of directed interaction the screen delineates is personal; the equipment is a series of activities—memory games, numbers exercises, word puzzles—designed for your sole use. None last more than a few minutes, some are tedious, some oddly engaging; most are somehow both—flow states emerge in surprising places, exercises training peripheral vision connect powerfully with memories of real activities.<sup>16</sup> This, of course, is a personal judgment, and some of these states are only available by refusing to play the game "properly," but it serves to raise some questions about the rewards found in this kind of play, in particular about their location.

Adventure gaming offers a space that mimics extreme hazard; it is enjoyable, ultimately, because it is danger-free, having no consequences beyond itself. The "game over" declaration releases the player even while terminating the game-world character. Clear rewards are found in-game—and thrills heightened by modes of interactive identification close-coupling the player to the internal world of the game don't change that (though they may produce what Juul calls the half-real sensation of gaming that is part of its attraction). By contrast, puzzle games rely on the hazarding of competency



and the satisfaction of mastery, rather than exposure to fictional danger. They, too, however, offer rewards in their own terms: success in the game results in a high score. Brain-training games do consist of puzzles. However, finding solutions is not really the point of these games because, although they demand fierce levels of on-screen attention, it is boosting performance in another place that is the real issue here. Alongside the collateral satisfactions of in-game mastery that the puzzles provide,<sup>17</sup> and/or the pleasures of a flow state, brain trainers are told they can expect to find the real rewards for their cognitive-muscle-building regime of hard labor in the game of real life. Cognitive work in-game produces enhancements pertinent to cognitive operations within everyday life. For instance, concentration and memory skills built in-game are to be transferred to other zones of everyday life.

*Not that the two are divided.* The body, playing in-game and simultaneously operating in places beyond the game, is a hinge here. It both defines (through attention) and denies (through embodiment) that unstable frame that divides and connects different zones of activity (different dimensions of place) and that has caused so much of the "trouble with the virtual" in new media studies.<sup>18</sup> We might say that this body, operating in two dimensions at once, at once performs in a space and rehearses in it; but with the caveat that both the performance and the rehearsal take various forms of place or are complicit in particular forms of emplacement.

Anthropologically inflected versions of media studies (see, e.g., Roger Silverstone)<sup>19</sup> brought together various theories of identity performance and critical cultural geography in interesting, if sometimes problematic, ways—notably weaving together Erving Goffman's analysis of performance and identity, based on symbolic interactionism, and the thinking of Henri Lefebvre and the French critical tradition, with which Perce is loosely associated.<sup>20</sup> It is useful to draw on these traditions but also to disentangle them somewhat: each suggests ways to consider distinctions between game play as performance and rehearsal, two relatively distinct, although also overlapping, ways of practicing space.

The focus on performance points to Goffman's explorations of the production of the self, a process accomplished on the various "stages" and sites of everyday life; sites that are often, in his research, the more or less "sequestered" places of institutions (e.g., prisons, hospitals, and educational institutions).<sup>21</sup> Goffman's focus is on small worlds and tiny actions, but his work on the interaction between the performer, audience, and stage underscores the degree to which identity performance is, despite its intimate scale, always interpersonal rather than personal, "interactional" rather than "idiosyncratic,"<sup>22</sup> and also situated. Moreover, Goffman, stressing interaction as the basis of the production of the self, queers the division between public and private space. In doing so, he complicates and even confounds—as feminism itself did (e.g., in the claim that the personal is political)—the division between public and private in these games of life. (This is one reason why, as Candace West convincingly argues, feminism

has more of a debt to Goffman than it may recognize.)<sup>23</sup> Elsewhere in his work, Goffman develops these questions of personal performance and its necessary production in public (on the public stage), in relation to interpersonal relations, through his analysis of modes of "civil inattention;"<sup>24</sup> ways of not looking at, or of overlooking, others encountered in a public zone, no longer policed by its division from a private realm. This might be used to explore the dynamics of spaces simultaneously used as rehearsal (back stage) and front stage (performance) space, to ask questions about a public economy of attention, in which non-symmetrical relations of presence and absence are imagined and willed as well as materially instantiated.

If West takes from Goffman a certain porosity between categories of public and private and the performance of the self within them, Mark Selzer, exploring Goffman's work in relation to parlor gaming, focuses on sequestration as a model both of the social world and as a model of gaming. This allows him to argue that the *relation* between model worlds (tiny worlds) and the world as model is essentially fractal.<sup>25</sup> The conception of the game as a closed world (even a sequestered space?) with its own dynamics is familiar. Huzinga, for instance, long ago argued that play is a "stepping out of real life into a temporary sphere of activity with a disposition all of its own."<sup>26</sup> Selzer moves this argument on by arguing that the games he explores are models of "real life" because they are models. In this context, he argues that the sequestered worlds of games (in his case, directly antagonistic parlor games) are dress rehearsals for real life (in his case, for the "military entertainment complex"<sup>27</sup>), not only in the sense that they may build particular real-world skills (e.g., Margaret Tan<sup>28</sup>), partly by exploiting a discrete physics that, for instance, translates risk/damage into an abstraction, but also because they at once model and realize a "social territory."<sup>29</sup>

Let me now turn back to the games I am concerned with. It might be said that sequestration—in mobile circumstances—is typically partial, partly virtual, a question of separated and shared layers, a matter of augmentation, or overlays, and a matter of dimension rather than distance. In the place of the parlor and parlor game—but also in the place of the training academy of Gradgrind and his unfortunates, frightening in its isolation and intensity—is the training game undertaken in the semi-transparent and overlaid space of the pop-up cognitive gym and the real-world space within which it is enmeshed. The game space is molecular rather than disciplinary if you want to see it that way.<sup>30</sup> Even the unity of space characteristic of the parlor game—with its real players (playing with unreal objects) who, through their physical presence as antagonists, contribute to its half-real quality, according to Selzer (who is drawing on Juul)—is fragmented.<sup>31</sup>

To train in public is not to be involved in the same kind of dress rehearsal as Selzer finds in parlor gaming, not least because, although it does involve rehearsal (work on cognitive skills to improve mental performance), it also entails performance now (play in a public place). In the case of Lumosity.com,



the act of "finding time" and "using space" to play the games *itself* marks a shift toward a more efficient way of "doing time" and "doing space." It might be said that the place I am in is not unified through play, thus becoming, in Selzer's words, a small world, but is instead divided—or, from my perspective as the player, it is re-doubled. The take-away lessons from Lumosity.com are not only centered on cognitive improvement (brain power) but efficient social interaction, here understood as efficient use of shared place. The Lazarus principle, beloved by digital industry commentators, says that previously dead time can be revived and given back to individuals through mobile information and communications technologies (ICTs).<sup>32</sup> These brain-training games are given to users as a means by which the dead time of odd moments—here the "wasted" spaces of ambient collectivity or sociality—can be used for personal efficiency gains. Lumosity.com tells users that they must play now to train for future performance (users play the game to improve cognitive efficiency), but, by playing, users are also/already improving personal efficiency at the time of play by making efficient use of what might be seen as "wasted" time or "wasted" space.<sup>33</sup>

Lumosity.com thus enacts a lesson in "how to use time" and "how to use space," particularly public space. Playing these games anytime, anywhere, a user learns to use public space as her own personal training room. And this space may not even be viewed as a "half-live" space; because, insofar as the user makes this larger public space—in all its dimensions—function only as a game space, she does not share it with real partners or antagonists. Marc Augé<sup>34</sup> noted that place and non-place were in part a matter of emotional attention, essentially arguing that "through an intense experience (or practice) of these spaces by its practitioners, they can be turned into places."<sup>35</sup> This proposition can be reversed; when enough directed intensity is removed from a certain dimension of space, it might become, partially at least, a non-place—even while it is being *used*. This can also be explicitly explored in relation to social interaction: a public economy of attention and interaction. Or, perhaps we could say that this re-doubled inattention leaves a hole in the fabric of the public, a dead end—in terms of communication and circulation, if not consumption.

#### PLACE AND THE DIMENSION OF MEMORY

The fractal sense of the world as a series of model spaces, games in which play becomes a rehearsal of action to be undertaken again in other models, stands in sharp contrast to the conception of play bound into various critical/situationist interventions into everyday life. Play, and the playing of games as a mode of inquiry ("not even a method"), was an important tool for the situationist fraction of the everyday life theorists. As Lefebvre famously put it, everyday life is both the site of the worst and the best, the site of something authentic as well as the site for the most nearly experienced

alienation.<sup>36</sup> Its promise is that it can be the site where activities might be undertaken to reveal or produce *specificity*, to break the equivalence model of commodity fetishism (relations between people disguised as indifferent relationships between things), to break the given rules of the game. Georges Perec's injunction to attend to the infra-ordinary by listening in to the self resonates with this, being based in part on a sense, shared with Lefebvre, that the ordinariness of everyday life conceals the marvelous<sup>37</sup> possibilities it holds and that these possibilities can flourish. Perec's work refuses the systematization of Lefebvre, and the model of space (the production of space) as a tri-partite production, that the latter provides. As we have already seen, Perec's method of investigation is playful and partial, and although it makes use of systems such as numerology, small rules, database sorts, and oblique tactics (such as, e.g., the careful inspection of specific classes of objects, the making of obscure lists, and the generation of taxonomies through various forms of numerology), it always seeks to move beyond rule-given "results."

It is through a form of play that Perec seeks to enter, not the sequestered institutions modeling everyday life, but the sequestered aspects of the self—the obscured treasure that is one's own set-aside memories. Thus, sequestration itself might be frustrated through a mode of playful archeology, one in which the subject is operated on. Where Selzer's game models tend to confirm the pre-given rules of the larger game (which also produces a focus on the anterior),<sup>38</sup> Perec's work has the disruptive effect of playing games on the game of life itself. He does this above all in relation to memory and often in relation to memory places.

Many of the Lumosity.com games train various forms of visual and spatial memory.<sup>39</sup> Once again, these games demand concentration and train attention. The tasks are to be completed against the noise of conflicting signals—sound contradicts vision, written information interrupts color, edge movement distracts from central vision tasks. This produces a demand to block out the exterior world—look up and you are done for, but these games also train against the habit of looking "in." Journeys into the imagination, returns to memorized places, do not help play this game, but rather constitute a slip of attention and guarantee failure. Lumosity.com's memory training thus teaches an end to expansion; signs must not fructify, become spaces or places. The contrast is with Perec's memory exercises, which encourage just such an imaginary expansion. Moreover, in Perec's work, the world of the self is rather consciously opened to others through the act of writing that makes of the intimate memory something that is to some degree public—a mode of publicity very different from the indifferent public rehearsal required by the game.

The endotic, viewed as a "playful" mode of interfacing with the self, takes very different form here<sup>40</sup> from the kinds of memory work demanded by Lumosity.com. Perhaps the connection between the two seems obscure, but Perec's intimate poetics of memory and the kinds of personalized



memory games Lumosity.com runs are both versions of what might be termed personal techniques of artificial memory. Moreover, while both rely in part on sequence, they are also heavily dependent on techniques of spatialization, key elements of the art of memory, as it has developed over many centuries. As Frances Yates notes in her authoritative account of the art of memory, the artificial improvement of the natural memory function, at once an art and a technique,<sup>41</sup> was said to have begun as virtuoso performance by the lucky Simonides, a Greek who was able to recall, by "placing" them around the banquet table at which they died, the victims of an unfortunate act of divine revenge<sup>42</sup> (the insult was a perceived deficit of the required attention being paid . . . ). Yates, for whom the interplay between science and magic was crucial, traced the early stories of arts of memory of the classical world through to the giant memory palaces of the Renaissance, where temples, palaces, entire cosmic ordering systems, became intelligent systems for storing and retrieving memories. These were somewhat remote from the daily business of artificial memory (e.g., mnemonics as a virtuoso trade), but one of the startling aspects of Yates's account is the way in which these memory systems required at once an inward journey into the imagination, and the replacing of memory into a far vaster—even cosmic—universe and its systems and rules; an absorption into shared symbolic worlds and highly elaborated world-spaces far beyond the private individual.

Here, then, are three forms of memory work, all of which involved a mode of systematic inward interrogation that is in some way or other automated. The distinction I want to draw concerns memory work as space making or as space constraining, as connecting or withdrawing from shared conceptions of world and place. I also want to underscore the intricate connections between systems of knowledge and understandings of place, and between memory making and place making.

#### SELF RENOVATION: TIMES AND PLACES

Everyday life: "what lags and falls behind."<sup>43</sup>

For everyday life theorists (among them, Blanchot, who I have cited here), the temporality of the everyday has a certain looseness, it is what "what lags and falls behind," and this may be how it defends itself from various forms of appropriation, from being fully matched with various cultural and social fields and their expectations and value systems, for instance. For Pierre Bourdieu, the structure of the game offers a model for understanding the social world—which is viewed as a series of overlapping fields, games of pre-structured chance, where players with particular embodied skills and abilities (*habitus*) compete against each other.<sup>44</sup> For Bourdieu, however,

the model does not equate to the world; structure and agency do not map seamlessly together because the dynamism of the social world in operation (in practice) produces constant struggles, processes of disjuncture, and re-adjustment. This is an analysis based on domination and differential capital, and Bourdieu, exploring the rapidly shifting social structures of the late twentieth century, and the demands they make, writes of the moment when the individual *habitus* cannot keep up with changes in the field—and frames this dynamic as "lag."<sup>45</sup> The looseness of which Blanchot writes is anathema to a world demanding increased performance in all fields.

Of course, this division, between a loose time and a tight one, is already familiar here, at least in relation to memory; lag is that space into which Perec would like to fall, a great significant world, the interior palace that parallels the architectural (if imaginary) memory palace of Yates, that might be roamed within. In such roaming, time might be both found and lost—and also treasures might be found. In contrast, these smartness games in their operation and in their address, reify the present, and the ability to match human processing speed with the speed of the now.

These games speed users up (or, at least, are intended to). They make users operate faster and in synch, perhaps, with what the world (and particularly the information society) demands. Brain training, determinedly intimate and entirely self-centered, a quintessential form of work on the self, like cosmetic surgery and personal genomics (alongside both of which it has risen), is above all a work of renovation. It is an upgrade, a restoration designed to bring the lagging body up to speed with the demands of its environment, to make it more competitive *in the field*.

For the brain trainers, the lag-free life, beating the field, staying up with the requirements of the field, is posited as a desirable goal, a key element of the work on the self that has become the normalized route to advancement and well being in contemporary society. Smartness games offer technology designed to "catch up" users' skills, to update their *habitus*, so that they can cope more effectively with the demands of the contemporary networked world, with the new public space in all its digital, fragmented, multitasking, speeded-up forms. The desire for personal speed up parallels that more narrow desire for lag-free communication, for an end to "temporal disturbances in the flow of communication" (thus, Mia Consalvo defines lag in relation to online activities as a problem caused and resolved by computers),<sup>46</sup> but also translates it into the realm of embodiment and the actions of bodies in space.

Finally, it is useful to note that while lag might be perceived to be a social or at least an interpersonal problem (a question of performance in a shared field of action), the solution offered by brain training is personal; what is being offered is a technological fix—perhaps a cheat, something always intrinsic to the claims made for memory improvement, and cognitive improvement in fact, as well as beloved of gamers with no time.



## UNCONVIVIALITY?

These games not only promise to renovate users' *habitus* so that they might perform better in future contests, they also help to turn space—public or private—to users' own immediate ends. Which raises the question of what happens to "the public" and to public space as that which is made a place through interaction with others, when the player plays? There are tensions between the public locations of mobilized practices of personal gaming—and sometimes also tensions between those who inhabit one or both of these worlds. Michael Bull has explored this issue in relation to MP3 use—which might cool down space for those shut out but remaining co-present,<sup>47</sup> and there are parallels to be made between listening "elsewhere" and the kind of play discussed here. Of course, degrees of presence, or the "presence availability" of one individual to another, whether this is gauged in a phenomenological register, or in relation to technological possibilities for various forms of connect or disconnect (the capacity to look away in another space) are not determined by technology alone, but are, as Nicola Green points out (with a direct reference back to Goffman and the mode of civil inattention as a form of courtesy), also conditioned by social categories and cultural formations.<sup>48</sup> Clearly, however, what is at issue is not simply a symbolic re-arrangement of attention, a form of chilling civil inattention maintained only through social codes, but something involving specific technologies, bodily dispositions, and sustained (trained) shifts in *habitus*. This shift in the quality of shared space might contribute to the relatively rarely articulated, but nonetheless often evident, hostility to public gaming. This is part of a hostility or ambivalence, focused around technology, that even if also articulating a broader concern, needs to be taken seriously and explored (if this has not been done within the horizon of game studies it is perhaps because the field in general is, perhaps for good reasons, extraordinarily defensive about the cultural form it explores).<sup>49</sup>

Forms of attention paid to the self through playing these games might simultaneously produce a form of contempt for, or indifference to, the common use of public space. Readdressing the small world of social interaction through the critical optic of everyday life and the production of space as a critical social production, the question of civility and interaction might be mapped onto conceptions of common space—and the demand for the right to make common use of common space—set out by David Harvey as an explicitly political right: as a politics of space and place.<sup>50</sup> This doesn't (either in Harvey's work or here) amount to a demand for nostalgic heterogeneity: for the collapse of the complexity of place, a faux reconstruction of "one space," but it might provoke consideration of questions of what Paul Gilroy termed *conviviality*<sup>51</sup> and defined as a form of engagement that is an "ordinary feature of social life"<sup>52</sup> which is explicitly considered as an "everyday, ordinary virtue."<sup>53</sup>

Considering race, Gilroy's concept of *conviviality* is that form of connection or interaction in space whereby "the strangeness of strangers goes out of focus and other dimensions of a basic sameness can be acknowledged and made significant."<sup>54</sup> In her consideration of Gilroy's project, Anker helpfully underscores the moment of quasi Brechtian distancing that is included in this idea—Gilroy seeks a mode of engagement between people in the social world that allows for a way of looking "with fresh eyes."<sup>55</sup> Here, though, playing games of self-improvement, the eyes are downward, are consciously not-looking out but in. In these kinds of activities, the strangeness of strangers is never *addressed*. Indeed, despite sharing space, strangers are not encountered, except as distractions to be eliminated—or as statistical points on a performance chart. We might say these games do not assist in the organization of potentially convivial relations as relations of place. If they are not hostile to others, then they are markedly unconvivial. In their concentration on the self, not the other, the aim and effect of the games produces; as a principle, not engagement but the mirror of narcissism; the rehearsal studio with its mirrors, rather than the flaneurism of the *dérive*, with its distanced, but still oddly engaged, mode of connection.

## THE CITY OF GLITCHES

In a study based on pervasive mobile use, the urban theorist Anthony Townsend explored the rise of the "telepathic city"<sup>56</sup> asking how networked connections and the flows they organize come to define the city and communicational standards become those by which it might be judged. I have argued that, as a mode of turning away and turning in, this kind of work on the self, at least, may actually outrage, rather than confirm, that "virtually compulsive"<sup>57</sup> demand for intimacy (with others) that Miller describes, that might people this telepathic vision. Or, at the very least, it might reveal a disjuncture between intimate communion with technology (as a mode of changing place) and communication. The confirmation, the necessary audience for the production (or performance) of the self that is said to underpin permanent communication, is in these games found in the mirror of the better-self glimpsed in the games, in the engagement on the self, which, undertaken now, is also for interaction "later." And it is germane to note in this context that even the competition is freeze dried: there are ways of measuring performance against others in these games but only as statistical norms against which to measure yourself (the public as publicity in the old sense of the word).

Mobile gaming might thus work against a normative demand for the kind of "connected presence" that increasingly wants (some part of you) to be "always on"—even as it promises to make you ready to be "just-in-time" or up-to-date. The activity of play, certainly the lone play explored here, creates temporary semi-enclosures, coalescences of virtual and physical



locations, brought into being through intense but temporary pulses of activity, which are characterized by their relative isolation and their partial, directionally uneven, temporally complex, separation from the surrounding environment. These are glitches sewn into the larger informational and social fabric.

Thus, it can be argued that what Townsend called the telepathic quality of the city, here re-adjusted to signal the capacity of the city to listen to itself, is reduced in these game zones, is also felt unevenly by players and non-players in their vicinity, and perhaps is felt to be less necessary by those who have retreated, in full public view, into their own rehearsal spaces. Something that these games give those who play them is their own (sense of) space and their own (sense of) time, the illusion perhaps that the world is a playground of their own. This is also that old illusion, proffered by digital technology—and given for real, even as it is also frustrated—of control.

#### STRATEGIC OPTIMISM?

Finally, I recognize that these are trivial games, trivial pursuits. And I am not against these games; in fact, to a very limited extent, I enjoyed playing them. Nor do I want to subscribe to a pious form of return to an organic "one space," nor to an uncritical mode of anti-computing. This piece has, however, sought to show how these training games, are, by virtue of the relations they prosecute between spaces (the place of the game, and the place of the world-game), and between people (the other who is statisticalized as opponent inside the game, and interpellated as distraction, when found outside of it), seeking to train us, or suggest to us, an ideal use of space, defined as a way of practicing place "efficiently" and in our own best interests.

Another educational game, but one that implies a different relationship between the game, the place, and the life, was played recently in South East London where students protesting against cuts in England have been re-thinking the location of the university. Among the somewhat situationist activities of the University of Strategic Optimism<sup>58</sup> was the mounting of five minute public lectures in the private-public spaces of local banks, which were transformed for a moment, from transactional spaces for private interactions, into common sites for a common learning project.

#### NOTES

1. In demonstrations in London around Christmas, 2010, students and lecturers making a claim for a particular kind of education, also made a claim for the streets (and for St. Stephen's Green, outside the English Parliament) as a common place. Hence the adopted slogan: "Whose streets? Our streets!"
2. Lumosity.com.

3. Charles Dickens, *Hard Times* (London: Penguin, 1985).
4. John Urry, *Sociology Beyond Societies: Mobilities for the Twenty-First Century* (London: Routledge, 2000).
5. Vincent Miller, "New Media, Networking and Phatic Culture," *Convergence* 14 (2008): 387–400.
6. Miller, "New Media, Networking and Phatic Culture," 338.
7. Caroline Bassett, "Up the Garden Path," *Second Nature* 2 (2009). In that article, I produced seven bulletins from the field of play, an inventory recording the experience of playing these private mind games in a series of different public spaces.
8. On narrativity and the ludic, see, for example, Bernard Perron and Mark J. P. Wolf, eds., *The Video Game Theory Reader* (New York: Routledge, 2009).
9. Georges Perec, *Species of Spaces and Other Pieces*, trans. John Sturrock (London: Penguin, 1997).
10. See, for instance, Perron and Wolf, *Video Game Theory Reader*.
11. For instance, qualities such as rich verisimilitude and rich interaction sustain a series of claims for the aesthetic, popular, cult, commercial, or creative significance of gaming/the game.
12. Stephan Clucas, "Cultural Phenomenology and the Everyday," *Critical Quarterly* 42 (2000): 8.
13. Perec, *Species of Spaces*, 211. But see also Goffman on the importance of the trivial, cited in Candace West, "Goffman in Feminist Perspective," *Sociological Perspectives*, 39 (1996): 365.
14. The original temporary autonomous zones (TAZ) were described as such by Hakim Bey as possibilities in the early days of the web and shortly afterwards declared dead. See Hakim Bey, *The Temporary Autonomous Zone, Ontological Anarchy, Poetic Terrorism* (Brooklyn, NY: Autonomedia, 1985, 1991; also at [http://hermetic.com/bey/taz\\_cont.html](http://hermetic.com/bey/taz_cont.html)).
15. Daren C. Brabham, "Crowdsourcing as a Model for Problem Solving: An Introduction and Cases," *Convergence* 14 (2008): 75.
16. See, Caroline Bassett, "How Many Movements?" in Michael Bull and Les Beck, eds., *The Auditory Culture Reader* (Oxford: Berg, 2003), 343–356.
17. Cracking the rules of a game world and cracking the system that solves a puzzle are parallel processes operating at different system levels. The connection might be explored in relation to protolol layers. See Alex Galloway, "Playing the Code, Allegories of Control in Civilization," *Radical Philosophy* 128 (2004): 33–40.
18. Early net discussions, particularly those focusing on identity and performance (rather than textual analysis), prioritized a division between the virtual and the real. See Elizabeth H. Bassett and Kate O'Riordan, "Ethics of Internet Research: Contesting the Human Subjects Research Model," *Ethics and Information Technology* 4 (2002): 233–247. Later work, in response, tends to downplay "life on the screen." See for instance: Helen Kennedy, "Beyond Anonymity, or Future Directions for Internet Identity Research," *New Media and Society* 8 (2006): 859. However, the question of this activity, and its framing, remains important in exploring the dimensions of contemporary place. Focusing on questions of place and acknowledging the tensions between presence and what might be termed attendance, exposes this.
19. Roger Silverstone, *Television, Technology and Everyday Life* (London: Routledge, 1994).
20. The apparent assimilation of these two traditions, which hides what are conflicts as well as over-laps, is renewed in interesting ways in relation to locative media, where the magic of the new and its prospects, very prevalent in early years of the net, is refreshed so that different ideological readings can



- temporarily be supported by the same prospects. The situationist *dérive* and the neoliberal world of the information economy are peculiar bed-fellows but sleep together nonetheless. An echo of this disjuncture is identified in relation to the work on the self by Louis McNay. The latter points to tensions in Foucault's later writing between the project of the self as enterprise and the ethics of the self as practical resistance to domination. See Louis McNay, "Self as Enterprise: Dilemmas of Control and Resistance in Foucault's *The Birth of Biopolitics*," *Theory Culture Society* 26 (2009): 55.
21. Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (New York, 1959), 244.
  22. Candace West, "Goffman in Feminist Perspective," 353–369.
  23. Candace West cites Nancy Henley and also Dorothy Smith, as exceptions to this trend. See Candace West, "Goffman in Feminist Perspective," 353–369. West also argues that Goffman understood the importance of the relative degrees of symmetry or asymmetry operating between actors and between various stages/sites on which action may be staged. It might be added that he did so in relation to a politics of place and space because it was upon various stages that these performances of the self were undertaken.
  24. Mark Selzer, among others, notes that Goffman was clear that civil inattention is a form of courtesy. See, Erving Goffman, *Relations in Public* (London: Penguin, 1972), 385, cited in Selzer's "Parlor Games: The Apriorization of the Media," *Critical Inquiry* 36 (2009): 100–134.
  25. Selzer, *Parlor Games*.
  26. Jan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens* (London: Maurice Temple Smith, 1970), 26–30, cited in Roger Silverstone, *Why Study the Media* (London: Routledge, 1999), 61. See also: Hector Rodriguez, "The Playful and the Serious: An Approximation to Huizinga's *Homo Ludens*," *Games Studies* 6 (2006), <http://gamestudies.org/0601/articles/rodrigues>.
  27. Selzer, "Parlor Games," 101.
  28. Margaret Tan Ai Hua, "The Paradoxical and the Reversible: Towards a Critique of the Intelligent Nation 2015 (iN2015) Masterplan and Pervasive Computing in Singapore," unpublished Doctoral Dissertation, National University of Singapore, 2011.
  29. Selzer, "Parlor Games," 101.
  30. The distinction is Deleuze's. Gilles Deleuze, "Postscript on the Societies of Control," *October* 59 (1992): 3–7.
  31. See Jesper Juul, "Games Telling Stories?—A Brief Note on Games and Narratives," *Game Studies* 1 (2001) <http://www.gamestudies.org/0101/juul-gts/>
  32. See, for example, Nicola Green, "On the Move: Technology, Mobility, and the Mediation of Social Time and Space," in *The New Media Theory Reader*, eds. Robert Hassan and Julian Thomas (Maidenhead: Open University Press, 2006), 249–266.
  33. The contrast between this invitation to productivity and media activities offering ways to use these spots of time idly—perhaps to skim what Joke Hermes called "put downable" media—is marked.
  34. Marc Augé, *Non-places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity* (London: Verso, 1995).
  35. Gemma San Cornelio and Elisenda Ardèvol, "Subjective Cartographies and Augmented Spaces: Practices of Place-making through Locative Media Artworks," *Communication* (2011, forthcoming).
  36. As Mattelart and Mattelart put it, the clear distinction between this and the French tradition is that the latter has "emphasized" the "mechanisms of socialization of communicating devices," while French critics of social

- geography, such as De Certeau, also clear that actions are still possible, are also "driven by the intimate conviction that the mechanisms of subjection are ever present" (Armand Mattelart and Michelle Mattelart, *Theories of Communication* [London: Sage, 1998], 126–127). One key difference between the French and US approaches concerns the degrees of self-reflexivity and agency accorded to social actors or social subjects within the structural constraints of an over-arching system.
37. The everyday is "where the marvelous exists." Ben Highmore, cited in Seth Giddings, "A Pataphysics Engine, Technology, Play, and Realities," *Games and Culture* 2 (2007): 392–404.
  38. Selzer thus follows his consideration of parlor games with an exploration of anteriorization in relation to Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go*, considered as a murder mystery.
  39. Frances Yates, *The Art of Memory* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1966), 6–7. The arts of memory have at various times been deployed in forms of virtuoso performance, but have also always been offered as a skill to develop in private. In more recent times an improved memory, acquired through memory work, has been meant to look natural, like a talent. Thus, memory improvement products of the late twentieth century flattered innate ability ("IQ of 200 and can't remember") whilst also promising discretion.
  40. For Perec, this narrative expansion is accessed through various forms of systemized rules; playful modes of data interrogation. For discussion, see Caroline Bassett, "How Many Movements?" *Open, Cahier on Art and the Public Domain* 9 (2005), 38–48; also at <http://www.skor.nl/article-2854-en.html>.
  41. See Heidegger on *techne* and *poesis* in the "Question Concerning Technology," in Martin Heidegger, *Basic Writings*, ed. David Farrell Krell (London: Routledge, 1993).
  42. Yates, *The Arts of Memory*.
  43. Blanchot, a French thinker in the same tradition as Lefebvre, described the contradictory nature of the everyday as "platitude (what lags and falls behind, the residual life with which we fill our trash cans and cemeteries: scrap and refuse)," whilst also arguing that "this banality is also what is most important if it brings us back to existence in its very spontaneity and as it is lived" (cited in Stephen Clucas, "Cultural Phenomenology and the Everyday," *Critical Quarterly*, 42 [2000]: 9–10).
  44. Pierre Bourdieu, "Some Properties of Fields," *Sociology in Question*, trans. Richard Nice (London: Sage, 1993), 72–77.
  45. Bourdieu, "Some Properties of Fields." Bourdieu's world might be considered closed (structure and agency informing each other), but this is to neglect what he insisted was the opening, the element of dynamism, and new ones are continually consecrated. It might be said that it is precisely because fields are not models of each other, are not fractally connected, that this mismatch, this opening, exists. In his model, not only do bodies lag and fail to conform, fields overlap, rise and fall.
  46. Mia Consalvo, "Lag: Language and Lingo: Theorizing Noise in On-line Spaces," in Bernard Perron and Mark J. P. Wolf, *The Video Game Theory Reader 2* (London: Routledge, 2009), 303.
  47. Michael Bull, "No Dead Airl The iPod and the Culture of Mobile Listening," *Journal of Leisure Studies* 24 (2005): 343–355.
  48. Nicola Green, "On the Move: Technology, Mobility, and the Mediation of Social Time and Space," in Robert Hassan and Julian Thomas, eds., *The New Media Theory Reader* (Maidenhead: Open University Press, 2006), 249–266.



49. See, for instance, Espen Aarseth's assessment of the field of computer game studies in "Computer Game Studies, Year One," *Game Studies* 1 (2001): 1-4.
50. "We need to find ways to build a dialectics of politics that moves freely from the micro to the macro and back again" (David Harvey, *Spaces of Hope* [Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2000], 52).
51. Paul Gilroy, *After Empire: Melancholia or Convivial Culture* (London: Verso, 2004).
52. Elisabeth Anker, "Review Essay: *National Love in Violent Times*," *Political Theory* 36 (2008): 765.
53. Anker, "Review Essay," 135.
54. Paul Gilroy, *Postcolonial Melancholia* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), 3-4, cited in Anker, "Review Essay," 765.
55. Gilroy, *Postcolonial Melancholia*, 135, cited in Anker, "Review Essay," 765.
56. Anthony, Townsend, "Connecting to the Future Seoul Searching—Cybernomads and the Ubiquitous City," *Receiver* 13 (2007): [http://www.vodafone.com/flash/receiver/13/articles/pdf/13\\_02.pdf](http://www.vodafone.com/flash/receiver/13/articles/pdf/13_02.pdf).
57. Anthony Giddens, *The Transformation of Intimacy: Sexuality, Love and Eroticism in Modern Societies* (Cambridge: Polity, 1992), 97.
58. University for Strategic Optimism: <http://universityforstrategicoptimism.wordpress.com/>

### Part III

## Urbanity, Rurality, and the Scene of Mobiles